

## “New brains seeking a new world?”: The Complex and the Awakening in Takuji Ichikawa’s *Monkey Man*.

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the ecological viewpoints presented by the Japanese novelist Takuji Ichikawa in his recent novel *Monkey Man* (2021) which stands out as a descant on the role of the corporates in accelerating the end of the world. Set in near future, the novel condemns the way of the world at present where people neglect nature and wallow in meaningless shindigs, falling easy prey to the psy-ops of the Complex, the greatest panjandrum of the age. Yet, a ray of hope sets in with the entry of the Arlecchino, a group of youngsters, determined to correct the grave follies of the past generations, using the same tool that was previously employed to wreak havoc upon the natural world, namely technology.

**Keywords:** animism, awakening, cli-fi, climate anxiety, culture industry, environmental citizens, the Complex.

The current year 2022 is witnessing umpteen number of incidents spread all over the world that disenchant humanity, like the glacier collapse in Italian Alps, heatwaves and severe drought in Portugal, ruinous deluge in Bangladesh, drinking water scarcity in the Kashmir valleys and many more that send unprecedented waves of fright among the hitherto nonchalant worldly people. A fusillade of such events has aroused indignation from the part of environmental activists and writers of fiction and non-fiction towards the unbridled exploitation of nature’s largesse which the posterity cannot probably avail. Though it is historically incorrect to claim that anthropogenic climate change and dystopian future are new kids on the block of world literature, one cannot refute the fact that there has been a mushrooming of literary works dealing with these tropes, ever since the publication of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, wherein he opines that the men of letters lack the imaginative fecundity to deal with the topic of climate crisis. So, it seems that writers all over the world have taken up Ghosh’s challenge, unleashing a plethora of such works.

Climate fiction, the moniker given to the pieces of literature that explicitly discusses man made ecological destruction, directs our attention primarily to climate change denial. An instance would be the reactions of some opulent visitors of the Greenwood Island in Michael Christie’s novel, who are reluctant to come to consensus with Jake’s (Jacinda Greenwood, a botanist and tour-guide of the island) view that the forests in this Pacific Island, probably the only surviving of its kind, are on the cusp of decline. Another common trope in climate change fiction is the depiction of a dreary pageant that corresponds with real life experiences, a paradigm being the one narrated in James Bradley’s *Clade*, which takes the readers on a

roller coaster ride enabling them to visualize the melting of polar ice caps, the upheavals related to monsoon, acute viral diseases and so on. The genre is also known for its investigation of the characters' unrest in the face of a climate catastrophe and their efforts to pull themselves together even when haunted by the nightmares of the sixth mass extinction that may wipe out all creatures on earth without the exception of human beings.

An overt exploration of environmental issues became prominent in Japanese literature in the twentieth century, roughly with the publication of Shiga Naoya's *The Death of a Certain Man's Sister* (1920) which deals with the tussle between a boy and his father over the former's participation in a rally protesting against the Ashio copper mine once owned by his grandfather and which causes great environmental damage. A few other notable Japanese novels that fit into this category are Hayashi Fumiko's *Floating Clouds* (1951), Ishimure Michiko's *Sea of Suffering* (1969) and Tsutsui Yasutaka's *Standing Person* (1974). The Japanese cli-fi has garnered momentum in recent years with many contemporary writers following suit. Takuji Ichikawa, one of Japan's best-selling novelists, is known for his works like *Be with You* (2003), *Love's Photographs* (2003), *Say Hello to Him When the Time Comes* (2004), *The Refugees' Daughter* (2019) and *Monkey Man* (2021). Of his works, the last two mentioned here picturize a world beset with the seemingly-last survivors on the earth who, instead of staring down the barrel of an ultimate collapse of the earth, strive to revive its lost majesty by pouring forth full faith in their capabilities for effecting the same. *The Refugees' Daughter*, translated by Emily Balistrieri, centers around Aimi, the titular daughter and some other characters who come to terms with their special capabilities that will ultimately aid them in ameliorating a shambolic world.

This article focuses on Ichikawa's 2021 novel *Monkey Man*, which is widely regarded as the companion piece to *The Refugees' Daughter* and translated into English by Lisa and Daniel Lilley. It takes the readers to a futuristic world hegemonized by the Complex, a sinister organization whose real-world counterpart may be assumed to be the MNCs that invisibly stand astride the entire world dominating it beyond imagination. The novel begins a la a young adult romantic fiction with the female protagonist Yuri describing her obsession with the character Tengo, whose physicality and demeanor are mentioned as unique. But soon, despite the undercurrent of high-school love, the novel unveils itself as a profound discourse about the elephant in the room, namely human-induced ecological damage and worst of all, laxity from the part of individuals and government machineries to address these issues. It also provides at least a fanciful bellwether of a life devoid of climate anxiety, in the form of supernaturalism gained by young people which they can utilise to safeguard what remains on the earth.

At the very outset, the novel draws a sharp contrast between the present generation, that is, Generation Alpha who is forced to bear the burden of a climate debacle and the older generations of Millennials and Generation X, who are primarily responsible for steering the world to the brink of an apocalypse. Emi, a friend of Yuri in her new high school, tells the latter about a popular online game called *babel* where the participants give in to the slogan of "No Give No Gain" to evolve into environmental citizens deft enough to rescue the world with their newly acquired powers (Ichikawa 10). Emi is caught off guard when she learns that Yuri is ignorant about the game: "Yuri, you really are clueless when it comes to things like this. What generation are you from, exactly? You're crazily old-fashioned, a total anachronism" (Ichikawa 9). Emi holds high opinion about her generation, highlighting the weapons of love and kindness that mark the aforesaid game. At the same time, she is full of

contempt for the former generations who cared only about razing to the ground everything that deters their realization of wealth and power. She regards her own generation as sharp-witted who instead of fashioning conniving games, take up the task of educating the hoi polloi about the need to rejuvenate the waste land that our planet has turned into, thanks to man's avaricious interventions.

The *babel* game is all about the players building a tower up to the heavens, aligning perfectly with the Tower of Babel in the *Bible*. Designed by the hacker group Arlecchino, the game is intended to draw the attention of the insouciant youngsters to the hitherto unparalleled obliteration of our planet and to transform them into saviors of the world, not only literally but also genetically. Hideto, the master brain behind the *babel*, had incorporated a special feature into the game, one of altering the genes when the players are exposed to particular pulse frequencies that facilitate what the author calls as 'awakening'. An awakened individual, within the purview of the novel, is one who recognizes his ability to rescue the world from doom. Truly awakened individuals uphold ethics and are willing to sacrifice themselves for the community at large. The readers, however, may be disappointed by the manner in which the few awakened people camouflage their abilities, fearing the measures that the Complex will take in order to use the former's dexterities for the latter's monetary upliftment giving scant regard to nature and the fellow beings.

The novel dismantles the traditional boundary between man and animal, starting from its very title. Tengo, the eponymous Monkey Man is described as resembling the Monkey King Son Goku from the traditional Beijing opera, clearing the decks for a conglomeration of nature, man and culture. Like Son Goku who transformed from a sullen monkey to a benign being, Tengo has metamorphized from an untaught ordinary school boy to an enlightened being, committed to the cause of nature. He assumes himself to be a man-animal hybrid due to the conviction that his father, one who protected a sacred mountain in their boondocks despite being an outsider, is an incarnation of a mountain monkey. His father continued to wander like an animal after Tengo's birth. Tengo is also an 'evolved' modern day inhabitant who strikes a note of similarity with Octavia Butler's empowered amborgs Akin and Jodahs who are offspring of man/animal interface, with his disproportionate body making him look "like an alien or some other creature failing in its attempt to imitate a human" (Ichikawa 2). A twentieth century Mowgli raised by the wolf-like shiba dog Kunne, he is depicted as an ardent advocate of animism, a belief that everything in nature is invaluable and that everything has a soul. In modern parlance, animism is regarded as "a sign harboring a multitude of meanings indexing an alternative future, a reanimated world in which the relational scope and the condition of being a person are expanded beyond the frontiers of a human" (Costa & Fausto 4). The trio – Tengo, Hideto, Ran – and later on Yuri, are presented as evolved beings who have adapted or upgraded themselves by transcending the assumed limits of man, to survive in a world marked by utter chaos.

Tengo even believes Yuri to be an incarnation of golden-rayed lily in the mountains within which the flower spirit resides. Yuri, "a princess who could hear the voices of plants and flowers," shares this ability with Tengo who can communicate with the mountain beasts almost in the fashion of a shamanistic soul journey (Ichikawa 25). He even compares himself to one of the greatest samurai fighters in Japan Ushiwakamaru who was raised by the great Tengu, a flying mythological demon. He suggests that though initiating communication even among human beings is a Herculean task, if one pays keen attention, one will be able to hear what the flora and fauna around them are thinking. Here Ichikawa pontificates the innate

connection among all beings on earth and asserts the dire need to revive the dormant armistice between man and nature for a bright future. The silent yet powerful communion between these two entities, which are not separate but one, becomes all the more axiomatic when the forest creatures ranging from the weakest to the strongest built a bulwark around Tengo and Yuri, in a bid to protect them against an agent of the Complex who was sent to put an end to their lives, having been reluctant to act in accordance with the Complex's demands.

*Monkey Man* can also be read as a scathing criticism on the culture industry, a product of globalization, that has been clouding peoples' ability to distinguish between their actual needs, and their desires induced by technological simulacra. The indulgence in a life of luxury at the cost of nature, given its necessary fillip by the strategies adopted by the panoptic powers who helm the world and who aim solely at the global market, has veered human beings away from their responsibility as sojourners to hand over the natural abode in all its serenity to the future generations. The Complex has succeeded in fomenting the instinctual and aggressive impulses of modern man, creating a parallel existence for them in a la-la land: "They pollute not only the planet's oceans and its land but also the bodies and minds of consumers" (Ichikawa 59). This 'pollution' often percolates deep, prompting individuals to show tendencies of depression and suicide and they, instead of figuring out the actual cause for their deplorable condition, blame the Misery Virus for their zombie-like states. Always at loggerheads with the Arlecchino, seldom does the Complex realize that its actions are internecine. People are fast losing their reasoning faculty, engrossing themselves in "highly processed foods and additives, medicines, pesticides, different types of electronic devices and all sorts of things that utilise the narcotic known as convenience" (Ichikawa 70). Once they are ensnared by such superficial items, they inadvertently turn obsequious to the Complex and give mandate to dictators who go on exploiting nature. The novelist asserts that only if people change their food and consumption patterns and the criteria for voting candidates to power, can they really enhance any possibility of further existence.

When Yuri's extraordinary healing powers are discovered, the Complex agents kidnap her, threatening her to use the same to grant eternity to its top rulers, corporation CEOs and commanders-in-chief. As she unwillingly puts her hands on the chest of one such 'top' individual in an act to heal him, she realises herself to be peering into a person whose heart is filled with vanity. She compares him to an alpha monkey expelled from its troop and wonders whether all those who have occupied powerful positions in the society inherit a heart ever ready to hanker after selfish needs, molding a world where wealth gap and even lifespan gap will loom large. Contrary to them, Generation Alpha is described as altruistic and as aware of the need for cooperation for their own subsistence. Yet it is important to prevent them from choosing instinct over logic and ironically enough the Arlecchino takes recourse to modern technology to this end: "How can we make sure more of the young garner the information needed to begin building a truly sustainable world? That's where the idea of the game came from. In order to turn information and knowledge into wisdom, we need experience-based awareness. And avatars used in gameplay generate a virtual experience. There's no better device" (Ichikawa 55). The *babel* game, which they regard as a mirror to the society, is primarily created to abate the attack power of the players that stem from panic and hopelessness; and to erase concepts like violence and territoriality from a world that is drenched in industrial toxicity, depressed minds and deadly diseases. A player gaining more points and reaching the higher levels will gradually acquire the ability to restrain oneself from

the base instinct of inflicting harm upon others for one's own profit. With highly evolved mirror neurons, the awakened youth will be rendered capable of fashioning a world where the struggling lot is provided timely assistance and where climate change literally dwindles into a fiction. Another instance of the younger generation's faith in technology to reverse the anthropological damage done to nature can be seen in Ran's insistence upon being a cyborg to throw her weight behind Arlecchino's agenda.

In the afterword to the novel, Takuji Ichikawa vehemently expresses his hope that if thousands of writers come up with narrative fictional works on climate issues, they will be able to make a collective step towards altering the world for the better. He, in a way, poses the same question as that of his character Tengo: "We can't just wait for the world to disintegrate, can we?" (Ichikawa 55). He believes that the assertive voices of these potential writers can cross territorial boundaries so as to exhort people to shoulder the responsibility for our unrighteous actions towards nature and to execute enduring corrective measures. What really matters is a change in aptitude of the worldly beings, from indifference to compassion, that is, a complete reworking on the existing value system, which the Arlecchino intends to carry out. The question that remains unanswered both within the context of the novel and on a macrocosmic level outside, is regarding the time it will take for at least half of the world's total population to evolve as responsible environmental citizens. We can only hope that it won't be too late.

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